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*December 1883-*

## A HURON HISTORICAL LEGEND

The wonderful tenacity with which uncivilized tribes frequently retain the memory of ancient events in their history is an interesting fact, which of late years has begun to receive attention from philosophical inquirers. Judge Fornander, of Hawaii, and Sir George Gray, in New Zealand, in their works on the Polynesian race and mythology, have shown how distinctly the people of that race, scattered over the many islands of the Pacific Ocean, have preserved the reminiscences of voyages, settlements, wars, alliances and family successions, during a period of nearly two thousand years. The Lenni Lenape, or Delawares, had a clear tradition of the war which ended in the overthrow of the Alligewi, or Moundbuilders, of Ohio, an event which could not have occurred much less than a thousand years ago. The Iroquois had also a traditional record of the same event, and they had preserved with remarkable minuteness the details of the formation of their confederacy, which preceded by about fifty years the era of Columbus. Their congeners and ancient enemies, the Hurons, were not less careful in retaining and transmitting their oral records. I had the good fortune to obtain from an authentic source one of these traditions, which clears up a doubtful question of some interest relating to the earliest intercourse between the Indians and the European settlers of North America.

When the enterprising French explorer, Jacques Cartier, in 1535, first sailed up the St. Lawrence, he found the sites of what are now the cities of Quebec and Montreal occupied by two Indian settlements, named Stadaconè and Hochelaga. They were permanent towns, composed of large houses, fifty yards or more in length, framed of saplings, and cased with bark. Encircling the town was a strong fortification, formed of trunks of trees, set in a triple row, and sustaining galleries furnished with magazines of stones to be hurled against their assailants. This construction of dwellings and defenses, as Mr. Parkman remarks (in his "Pioneers of France in the New World"), was identical with that which was practiced among the tribes of the Huron-Iroquois family, but was not in use among those of Algonkin lineage. This evidence of the stock to which the inhabitants of Hochelaga and Stadaconè belonged was confirmed by two brief vocabularies of their language which Cartier preserved, and which leave no doubt that they were members of the widespread family comprehending the

Huron and Iroquois nations, along with the Eries, Andastes, Tuscaroras, and other tribes of the west and south.

Not quite seventy years later, in 1603, when the founder of Canada, the illustrious Champlain, revisited the scenes of Cartier's discoveries, not a trace of the two populous and well-fortified towns remained. In place of their commodious dwellings and well-cultivated fields he found only some wretched wigwams, in which were huddled a few half starved Indians of the wandering Algonkin race. What had become of their more civilized predecessors? It is remarkable that neither Champlain, nor any of the intelligent explorers or missionaries who followed him, seem to have troubled themselves about this interesting question. There could have been no difficulty at that time in ascertaining the truth; and indeed, as will be shown, the facts were well known to some at least of those new adventurers. But their minds were absorbed with matters which to them were of more immediate importance, and they did not take the trouble to record events which seemed to them to be of as little consequence as those "battles of the kites and crows," the wars of the ancient Britons and Saxons, appeared to Milton. But as these obscure struggles have lately furnished subjects of much interest to the readers of Freeman, Green and other historians of our day, so the early events of aboriginal history are beginning to assume a new importance in the annals of our continent.

In the time of Champlain, the Indians of the Huron-Iroquois race, nearest to Montreal and Quebec, were the famous "Five Nations" of the Iroquois confederacy. They possessed, as is well known, nearly the whole of Northern New York, their territories extending from Lake Champlain westward to the Genesee River. In another direction, near Lake Huron, in the extreme north-west of what is now the Province of Ontario, dwelt the people who were known to the French as Hurons, and to the English, at a later day, as Wyandots—their proper name being Wāndat, or as the Iroquois now pronounce it Wennat, or Wānat. The Hurons became the allies, and the Iroquois the most formidable enemies of the French colonists. If the people whom Cartier discovered had not been utterly exterminated, it is in one or other of these communities—the Iroquois or the Hurons—that we must look to find the descendants of the former denizens of Hochelaga and Stadaconé.

The evidence of language unfortunately does not help us here. The Huron and Iroquois languages differed considerably, but there was a close family likeness between them. The Iroquois had five dialects and the Hurons at least two, which showed many variations of words and forms. A comparison of the brief vocabularies preserved by Cartier with the words

of these various dialects shows a general resemblance, but no clear indications by which we can determine the particular branch of this linguistic family to which this ancient speech belonged. The words are too few and the orthography too uncertain and corrupt to allow of any positive conclusion from this evidence.

The natural inclination of those who have written on this subject has been to find in the Iroquois the descendants of Cartier's Indians. They were the nearest people who spoke a similar language, and they had, as Colden in his "History of the Five Nations" correctly records, a tradition that their ancestors formerly dwelt north of the St. Lawrence, near the site of Montreal. This tradition, however, as is now known, referred to a primitive and long distant period, when the Hurons and the Iroquois formed separate bands of one united people, and possessed the country on the north shore of the St. Lawrence, from Lake Ontario to the Gulf. From this region they both emigrated, at different periods, impelled partly by dissensions which had broken out between them, and partly by the attacks of the fierce Algonkin nomads who surrounded them. The Iroquois took possession of the country south of Lake Ontario, which they had inhabited, as their traditions affirm, for centuries prior to Cartier's visit. At a much later day, and, it would seem, soon after the French explorer had left the St. Lawrence, the Hurons also deserted their ancient seats on the north bank of that river, and retreated to the distant shores of Lake Huron. The impelling cause of their flight was the persistent hostility of the Iroquois, who had lately become much more formidable through their confederation. The retreat of the Hurons to the west gave them a respite of nearly a century, during which their numbers seem to have increased, and their villages along the Georgian Bay, surrounded by well-cultivated fields, acquired the aspect of comfort and homely wealth which delighted the founder of New France when he first beheld it. "To the eye of Champlain," writes Parkman, "accustomed to the desolation he had left behind, it seemed a land of beauty and abundance. There was a broad opening in the forest, fields of maize, with pumpkins ripening in the sun, patches of sunflowers, from the seeds of which the Indians made hair-oil, and in the midst the Huron town of Otouacha. In all essential points it resembled that which Cartier, eighty years before, had seen at Montreal: the same triple palisade of crossed and intersecting trunks, and the same long lodges of bark, each containing many households. Here, within an area of sixty or seventy miles, was the seat of one of the most remarkable savage communities of the continent." \*

\* "Pioneers of France in the New World," 7th edit., p. 367.



It was mainly to Champlain himself that the destruction of this flourishing community was due. In an evil hour for the Hurons, he formed an alliance with them, and led them on a fruitless expedition against the Iroquois, from whose territories the allies retreated baffled and humiliated. The exasperated confederates retaliated by furious assaults upon the French settlements, and by continual inroads into the country of the Hurons. It was in 1615 that Champlain arrived among them. In 1649 the last of the twenty Huron towns had surrendered to the Iroquois power, and lay in heaps of ruins and ashes. Of the inhabitants who survived the conquest, some joined the conquerors and were adopted among them; others took refuge with their French allies at Quebec, near which city their descendants still reside; but the greater number retreated to the far West, and found an asylum among the Ojibways, on the shores and islands of Lakes Superior and Michigan. At one time their principal abode was on the Island of Michilimackinac, and here, apparently, they were residing at the time when the death of their great chief occurred, as related in the following legend. From this retreat they were induced, as recorded in the story, to remove southward and place themselves under the protection of the French forts at Detroit and in northern Ohio. In these new abodes they remained for more than a century, and, in spite of their reduced numbers, played a somewhat important part in the events of western history. In the peculiar Indian system of political relationships their nation ranked as the "grandfather," and head of all the surrounding tribes. Their marked intelligence and force of character gave them a predominant influence among the more loosely organized Algonkin bands. Tenaciously adhering to their French allies, even when the latter had been forced to abandon them, they took a determined part in the war of Pontiac against the English. Finally, about the middle of the present century, the greater portion of the Hurons—now known as the Wyandots—removed to the West, under the auspices of the American government, and found another respite in their wandering existence on reserves which were assigned to them in Kansas and the Indian Territory.

A few families, however, refused to join in this last migration. These families, comprising in all about seventy individuals, clung to the small reservation which had been set apart for them in Canada, on the west bank of the Detroit river, in the township of Anderdon, between Amherstburg and Sandwich. Here they still reside, the last remnant in Canada of the once powerful Indian nation; the last, at least, who speak the language of their people; for the few so-called Hurons of Lorette, near Quebec, are a mongrel community, and have entirely forgotten the speech of their forefathers.

When I visited the Wyandot reservation, in the summer of 1872, the chief of the tribe, an elderly man of fine presence and marked intelligence, who lived in the style of a substantial farmer, gave me much information concerning the history and mythology of his people. He bore in English the name of Joseph White, and in his own language the somewhat singular designation of Mandorong, or "Unwilling." The name, which he owed to the fancy of his parents, did not by any means indicate his disposition, which was particularly frank and genial. He assured me that the traditions of his people represented them as having originally dwelt in the east, near Quebec. He had once journeyed as far as that city, and had then visited the remnant of the Hurons at Lorette. Though they had lost their ancient language, and could only communicate with him in French, they had not forgotten this primitive tradition of their race. They took him, he said, to a mountain, and showed him the opening in its side from which the progenitors of their people emerged, when they first "came out of the ground." The ordinary metaphor by which the Indian tribes, like the ancient Egyptians, declare themselves to be the autochthones of a country, had in this case, as in many others, taken a grossly concrete form. In answer to the inquiry whether his people had any tradition of their migration from the East to their present abode, the chief related the following story, which, strange as some of its incidents may seem, is probably in the main a narrative of events which really occurred:

#### THE LEGEND OF KING SASTARETSI.

In very ancient times the Hurons (or Wandat) had a great king, or head-chief, named Sastaretsi (or Sastaréché). They were then living in the far East, near Quebec, where their forefathers first came out of the ground. The king told them that they must go to the West, in a certain direction, which he pointed out. He warned them, moreover, that this would not be the end of their wanderings. He instructed them that when he died they should make an oaken image resembling him, should clothe it in his attire, and place it upright at the head of his grave, looking toward the sunrise. When the sunlight should fall upon it, they would see the image turn and look in the direction in which they were to go.

King Sastaretsi went with his people in their westward journey as far as Lake Huron, and died there. But he had time before his death to draw on a strip of birch bark, by way of further guidance, an outline of the course which they were to pursue, to reach the country in which they were finally to dwell. They were to pass southward down Lake Huron, and

were to continue on until they came to a place where the water narrowed to a river, and this river then turned and entered another great lake.

When he died they fulfilled his commands. They made an image of oak, exactly resembling their dead king, clothed it in his dress of deerskin, adorned the head with plumes, and painted the face like the face of a chief. They set up this image at the head of the grave, planting it firmly between two strong pieces of timber, its face turned to the east. All the people then stood silently round it in the early dawn. When the rays of the rising sun shone upon it, they saw the image turn with such power that the strong timbers between which it was planted groaned and trembled as it moved. It stayed at length, with its face looking to the south, in the precise direction in which the chief had instructed them to go. Thus his word was fulfilled, and any hesitation which the people had felt about following his injunctions was removed.

A chosen party, comprising about a dozen of their best warriors, was first sent out in canoes, with the birch-bark map, to follow its tracings and examine the country. They pursued their course down Lake Huron, and through the River and Lake St. Clair, till they came to where the stream narrowed, at what is now Detroit; then advancing further they came, after a brief course, to the broad expanse of Lake Erie. Returning to the narrow stream at Detroit, they said: "This is the place which King Sastaretsi meant to be the home of our nation." Then they went back to their people, who, on hearing their report, all embarked together in their canoes and passed southward down the lake, and finally took up their abode in the country about Detroit, which they were to possess as long as they remained a nation. The image of King Sastaretsi was left standing by his grave in the far north, and perhaps it is there to this day.

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It will be observed that in this narrative "King Sastaretsi" is described as leading the Hurons in their migration from the east, and as dying just before their return from the northwest to the vicinity of Lake Erie. The time which elapsed between these two events cannot have been less than a century. This portion of the legend, at first perplexing, is explained in a singular and unexpected manner by a passage in the well-known work of the French traveler, Baron La Hontan, whose descriptions of New France in the period between the years 1683 and 1694 contain the results of much inquiry and acute observation. "The leader of the nation of Hurons," he tells us, "is called Sastaretsi. The name (he adds) has been kept up by descent for seven or eight hundred years, and is likely to continue to future



ages."\* This practice of keeping up the name of a chief by succession seems to have been common among the tribes of the Huron-Iroquois stock. The names of the fifty chiefs who formed the Iroquois league have been thus preserved for more than five hundred years.† The Sastaretsi who led his people from the St. Lawrence to Lake Huron was the predecessor of his namesake whose dying injunctions induced them, after their overthrow and expulsion by the Iroquois, to take refuge about the French forts at Detroit and in northern Ohio.

It is a curious and noticeable fact, however, that neither the Iroquois nor the French are mentioned in this story, nor is any reason given either for the departure of the Hurons from their original home near Quebec, nor for their return from the northwest to the neighborhood of Detroit. The pride of the Indian character refused to admit that their wanderings were determined by any power beyond their own will and the influence of their chief.

The story of the image is probably true in its main incidents, though tradition has added some marvelous details. It was natural that the French, after they had established their forts in Michigan and Ohio, should desire to have the aid of their Indian allies in defending them against the Iroquois and the English. This project would involve the removal of the Hurons from their asylum in the far north to the perilous vicinity of their powerful and dreaded foes. While the leaders might be persuaded, by the arguments and solicitations of their French friends, to take this risk, the majority of the people may have been unwilling to abandon their secure retreat and their cultivated fields. To overcome this hesitation, it would be natural also for the chief to employ some artifice. Of this species of management, to which the leading men among the Hurons and Iroquois were wont to resort in dealing with their self-willed but credulous people, many curious and amusing examples are related by the early missionaries. In the present instance, it would seem that an appeal was made to the reverence with which the memory of their deceased head chief was regarded. A rude image of him was set up with much formality, and a report was circulated of a death-bed prediction made by him concerning it. Early in the morning after its erection the image was found to have preternaturally changed its position, and to be gazing in the direction in which the great chief, in his lifetime, had desired that his people should

\* "New Voyages to North America," English translation, 2d edit., London, 1735; Vol. 2, p. 45.

† See "The Iroquois Book of Rites," in Brinton's "Library of Aboriginal American Literature," p. 30.



go. This monition from the dead was effectual, and the emigration at once took place. The legend, as told in after times, assumed naturally a more lively and striking cast; but in its leading outlines it is intelligible and credible enough. Its chief interest, however, resides in the fact that it proves beyond question the existence of a belief among the Wyandots of the present day that their ancestors came to the West, at no very distant period, from the vicinity of Quebec.

Two casual references which are made to this subject in the Jesuit "Relations" deserve to be noticed. In general the missionaries, while describing with much particularity the customs and religious rites of the Indians, and in fact every matter which seemed to have any bearing on the work of their conversion, took no pains to record any facts relating to the early history of the tribes. Only a casual allusion apprizes us that the former residence of the Hurons near the coast was spoken of among them as a well known fact. The Relations for 1636 contain a full and detailed account of the Huron nation by Brebeuf, an admirable work, from which our knowledge of that people in their primitive state is chiefly drawn. In speaking of their festivities he refers to their war-dances in the following remarkable passage:

"Among other songs and dances, there are some in which they take occasion to destroy their enemies as it were in sport. Their most ordinary cries are *hen, hen*, or *héééé*, or perhaps *wiiiii*. They refer the origin of all these mysteries to a certain being, rather a giant than a man, whom one of their people wounded in the forehead *at the time when they lived near the sea*, for the offense of not replying by the usual complimentary response of *kwai* to the ordinary salutation. This monster therefore cast the apple of discord among them, as a punishment for the injury, and after having taught them their war-dances, the Ononhoroia, and this chorus of *wiiiii*, sank into the earth, and disappeared. Could this indeed," asks the worthy missionary, "have been some infernal spirit?"

The other allusion seems, at the first glance, to bear a different interpretation. It has been quoted by Gallatin and others as affording evidence that the people whom Cartier encountered on the St. Lawrence were Iroquois; but a careful consideration of the facts, in the light of recent information, shows that this inference cannot properly be drawn from it. Father Le Jeune writes from the vicinity of Quebec in 1636: "I have often sailed from Quebec to Three Rivers. The country is fine and very attractive. The Indians showed me some places where the Iroquois formerly cultivated the land."\* These Indians are of the Algonkin race,

\* Relation for 1636, p. 46. I have somewhat abridged the passage in the translation.

and their statement, which we need not question, merely shows that their immediate predecessors in that locality were Iroquois. If, as the Huron traditions affirm, the flight of their ancestors from their eastern abode was caused by the attacks of the Iroquois, we may be certain that the latter did not leave the deserted country vacant. Their first proceeding would be to assume possession of it, and to plant colonies at favorable points. This was their custom in all their conquests. An Iroquois colony was thus established at Shamokin, now Sunbury, in Pennsylvania, after the Delawares were subdued; and other settlements secured the territories which the confederacy acquired in northern Ohio. Thus it would seem probable that, after the flight of the Hurons, the Algonkins held their lands along the northern bank of the St. Lawrence for considerable time. At length, however, the annoyance and loss from the incessant attacks of the surrounding Algonkins became so intolerable as to make these distant outposts not worth keeping. Their abandonment apparently did not long precede the arrival of Champlain, who, as is well known, found the Hurons and the Algonkins united in strict alliance, and engaged in a deadly warfare with the Iroquois.

We are thus enabled, by the aid of Indian tradition, to clear up some perplexities which have been caused by the seemingly contradictory accounts of the first explorers of our continent. We gain at the same time a clear conception of the movements among the native tribes which preceded the establishment of European colonies in North America, and which exercised a momentous influence on the fortunes of those colonies.

*Horatio Hale*